

Three Oaks – A Sussex Hamlet

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(A transcription of an article published in the Sussex Family Historian (Vol. 17, No. 3, September 2006) about the settlement of Three Oaks in East Sussex, England)

I had the good fortune to have been able to bring up my sons, Tim and Chris Lambourne, in the delightful hamlet of Three Oaks a few miles to the north east of Hastings.

The story of Three Oaks is in many respects typical of that of small communities throughout Sussex and should therefore be of general interest. More specifically, there are undoubtedly members of our Group who have connections, however distant, with the village who would be interested to know something of its history and, in particular, to be made aware of the highly informative account by Alice Beeching entitled 'Memories of Three Oaks'. Alice Beeching was born in the village and lived there for many years.

Three Oaks today forms part of the parish of Guestling and thus has no clearly defined boundaries. Most would agree that it encroaches onto some of the land of the old estates of Ashburnham, Coghurst and Maxfield. However, many would claim that it now justifiably encompasses most, if not all, of the ancient manor at Great Maxfield nearby, even though there is no historic basis for this.

Maxfield Manor can be traced back to the 13th Century when it was given to the Abbey at Battle by Robert Foster. It appears that it may have been used as a convalescent home for the monks. It continued to belong to the Abbey until the Dissolution when, in 1538, all the lands of the monastery were surrendered to the king. It then seems to have been granted to Sir Antony Browne and continued to be tied to the Manor of Battle until the Battle estates were sold in 1719. Later owners included Thomas Medley and Wastel Brisco. The manorial rights seem to have lapsed in 1925. More recently, Great Maxfield was owned by Lord Douglas of Barlock, an ex Governor of Malta. Maxfield Manor was the birthplace of the great scholar, Gregory Martin, who translated the Latin Bible into English (the 'Douai Version') and who died in Rheims in 1582.

As far as the heart of Three Oaks is concerned, there are few obvious signs along the main road, Butchers Lane, of a settlement of more than perhaps a century and a half. Yet there is a reference in the Court Rolls for 1543 to 'Le three Ok' and we know something of the ownership of the land as far back as 1640. *The Victoria History for the County of Sussex* records that a reputed manor of 'Three Oakes' was held in 1640 by James Rootes, who conveyed it in that year to Laurence Brightis. The manor appears to have subsequently been in the possession of a number of families until it is last mentioned in 1810 when it was assigned to Elizabeth, the wife of Charles Smith

Mortimer of Eastbourne.

The Land Tax returns though leave us in little doubt that the manor was thereafter known as Three Oaks Farm. The farm was modest in size, sixty-five or so acres, and concentrated in the area which is considered the central part of today's village. The Tithe map of 1843 shows a substantial dwelling in this area and this was presumably the farm house. However, it does not appear on the 1873 Ordnance Survey map and may possibly have been demolished to make way for the Hastings to Ashford Railway line which was opened in 1851. In more recent years the farm house was a corrugated iron bungalow in Maxfield Lane.

Reference to Three Oaks on the 1873 map seems to relate merely to the farm itself and not to the whole area which would be included in today's village. Instead, this appears to have been known as Pit Lane, which is the former name of the main thoroughfare, Butchers Lane. By 1873, Eightacre Lane, which formerly ran in front of Three Oaks Cottages, is shown to follow its present course to its junction with what is now Butchers Lane to the west of the railway. This may have been the result of the railway or possibly to provide access to the sandstone quarry which was located more or less opposite this junction. The old junction of Eightacre Lane with Butchers Lane was opposite Maxfield Lane which passes by the side of the pub and which was an old access road to the Manor. Both Eightacre Lane and Fourteenacre Lane at the opposite ends of the village seem to have been named after the Eightacre and Fourteenacre woods which are shown on the 1873 map.

A hundred or so years ago three buildings provided the focal points for life in the small community – the shop, the pub and the chapel. The shop was a building attached to Three Oaks Cottages immediately across the road from the pub. It sold pretty well everything the villagers might need. Hillcrest Stores in Eightacre Lane eventually replaced this shop, although this too has now been closed for some time. Before the pub, known as the Three Oaks Hotel, was built in the later years of the 19th Century the shop also sold beer.

The pub itself seems rather a large building for what was then such a small hamlet. It has been claimed that it was in some way connected with the Hastings to Ashford Railway. However, although the line was opened in 1851, there were no stations anywhere between Hastings and Winchelsea until the early years of the 20th Century. Three Oaks and Guestling Halt was opened in 1908. A more plausible reason for the size of the hotel is that it served as a destination for horse drawn coach trips from the nearby towns of Hastings and St.Leonards-on-Sea.

The Methodist Chapel opposite Meadow Cottages was the only place of worship in Three Oaks itself. The chapel is shown on the 1873 Ordnance Survey map as a Bible Christian chapel. The Bible Christians were a branch of Methodists who eventually united with the other main groups to form the present Methodist Church. The return for the 1851 Religious Census suggests that there had been a Bible Christian group in the parish of Guestling from before 1800. In 1851 this group, which was undoubtedly the one which eventually found a home within the Three Oaks chapel, was still without a purpose built building. It was probably meeting for worship in a private dwelling house, which would have been rather cramped as there were apparently thirty to forty attending each service!

In the early years of the last century, there were about twenty or so dwellings in the main part of the village, including Rose Cottage, which probably dates from the 18th Century and is reputed to have once been an alehouse, Meadow Cottages, Walnut Villa, The Laurels, Mill Cottage and Three Oaks Cottages. Bungalows in Morgay Wood Lane and in Butchers Lane to the east of Rose Cottage, including Woodstock which I once occupied, were built during the 1920s. Mains gas, electricity and water were installed in the village in 1930, 1932 and 1960 respectively. The village remains without street lighting and mains drainage. The latter has limited later development and probably saved Three Oaks from the extensive growth experienced by many Sussex villages, including its near neighbour Westfield. However, although it has remained something of a backwater, it has had some notable residents. Dr. Lester Smith, the discoverer of vitamin B.12, once lived in the hamlet and Olive Brockwell, the nanny of Christopher Robin fame, was a resident of many years.

Alice Beeching's 'Memories', which was referred to earlier, provides a remarkable insight into many aspects of everyday life in the village in the early years of the 20th Century. It should be read by anyone who wishes to know about the individual cottages and the pub, shop, chapel and railway or gain some insight into the joys and hardships, the daily routine, the schooling, the clothing, the characters, and so on. Alice was born and brought up in one of Meadow Cottages. Copies of her delightful unpublished account are to be found in the Hastings Reference Library, the East Sussex Record Office and our Group's Library at the Family History Centre at Lewes.

Select References:

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